Social media representations of the pilgrimage to Mecca

JOURNAL OF MUSLIMS IN EUROPE 10 (2021) 1–22

BRILL

brill.com/jome

Social Media Representations of the Pilgrimage to Mecca

Challenging Moroccan and Dutch Mainstream Media Frames

Kholoud Al-Ajarma | ORCID: 0000-0003-1271-6770
Alwaleed Centre, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
kalajar@ed.ac.uk

Marjo Buitelaar | ORCID: 0000-0003-1751-2080
Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands
m.w.buitelaar@rug.nl

Abstract

In this article, we compare representations of the pilgrimage to Mecca posted on Facebook and Youtube by 'ordinary' pilgrims from Morocco and (semi)professional bloggers of Moroccan parentage in the Netherlands. We discuss how such posts challenge representations that circulate in the mainstream media in both countries about Islam in general and the hajj in particular. For Morocco we demonstrate that this kind of digital mediation of pilgrimage contests the ways in which the state-organized hajj is framed in Morocco's national media. For the Netherlands, we argue that bloggers deconstruct dominant images of the Muslim 'other' in their self-presentations as specifically Dutch Muslim pilgrims by connecting the meanings they attribute to the pilgrimage to Mecca to universal issues.

Keywords

pilgrimage to Mecca – digitised self-presentations – storytelling – belonging – citizenship

1 Introduction[1]

Salaheddine Benchikhi is a 40-year-old filmmaker, stand-up comedian and writer who was born in Casablanca, but grew up in the Netherlands. He is a well-known vlogger among Moroccan-Dutch Muslims and has his own YouTube channel, which attracts over a million viewers each month.[2] Sponsored by the travel agency Mekka & Medina Reizen, in 2017 Benchikchi performed the *'umra*, the voluntary or 'smaller' pilgrimage to Mecca.[3] Later that year, he posted a 27-minute Dutch-language documentary about his journey. In an interview with Buitelaar, he explained his motivation for making the documentary as follows:

> For me it is a form of *'ibada*, worship, to reach out and motivate these [Dutch Muslim] kids. God has given me this opportunity, this channel, so using my artistic freedom is my specific kind of worship.[4]

Benchikhi's *'umra* documentary is one of the representations on public social media platforms of the pilgrimage to Mecca that we discuss in this article. In what follows, we examine how such representations relate to mainstream media frames about Islam in Morocco and the Netherlands, the two countries where the authors of the article conducted research concerning the significance of the pilgrimage to Mecca in Muslims' daily lives.[5] In Morocco, Islam is framed as a crucial part of national identity. The Moroccan king belongs to the dynasty of the Alawites, who trace their descent back to the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, in the Netherlands, Islam is predominantly framed as alien. In the Dutch media, negative representations concentrating on radicalisation and

1 We would like to thank Elisabetta Costa, Welmoed Wagenaar and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on a previous draft of this article. We are also most grateful to NWO for their generous grant (360-25-150) which enabled our research into the pilgrimage to Mecca.

2 See, e.g, the cover of Benchikhi (2016).

3 In contrast to the hajj pilgrimage, which is mandatory for all able Muslims, the *'umra* can be performed throughout the year.

4 Date interview: 3 March 2020.

5 The research projects of both authors are part of a larger research programme called 'Modern Articulations of Pilgrimage to Mecca'. The programme is coordinated by Marjo Buitelaar and funded by NWO, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. For Kholoud Al-Ajarma's PhD. project, she conducted eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco to study the socio-cultural embeddedness of the pilgrimage to Mecca in the everyday lives of Moroccans between 2015 and 2017. Her data therefore consist predominantly of personal observations in Moroccan public and private settings and informal conversations. Buitelaar conducted biographical interviews with over 50 Dutch pilgrims with Moroccan backgrounds in the Netherlands about the meaning of the pilgrimage in their daily lives and in their various senses of belonging.

public controversies concerning mosques, the *niqab* as a symbol of women's oppression and ritual slaughter dominate (see Meuzelaar 2014). What makes representations of Islam such as those that feature in Benchikhi's documentary particularly interesting to study is the potential power of the Internet to offer those who traditionally have limited 'speaking capital' the opportunity to produce and circulate information that is not modulated and refracted in dominant discourses (Mitra, 2004: 498). As we shall demonstrate, in Morocco this works out quite differently than in the Netherlands.

In a Muslim majority country like Morocco, the hajj has a strong presence in people's daily lives through, for example, the Saudi Channel 'Makkah Live', which live-streams 24/7 pilgrims circling the Ka'ba, the cuboid building in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.[6] Mecca features in numerous Moroccan folktales, proverbs and songs that are transmitted orally from one generation to the next (see Al-Ajarma, 2020). Furthermore, in nearly all Moroccan homes, shops and offices, one finds decorations in the form of photographs, paintings or wall tapestries depicting the Ka'ba, often paired with an image of the Grand Mosque in Medina where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. Of particularly strong symbolic significance is that Muslims face Mecca to perform the five daily prayers. Similarly, the dead are buried facing Mecca. In sum, Mecca is a strong, embodied point of orientation in the daily lives of many Moroccans.[7]

Not surprisingly, the hajj season receives much attention in Morocco's national media. The organisation of the hajj from Morocco is a state-monopoly and the Moroccan king presents himself on state-television as the patron of the 32,000 Moroccan pilgrims who perform the hajj annually. Like Muslims elsewhere, most Moroccans long to visit Mecca to fulfil the religious obligation to perform the hajj. The pilgrimage ambitions of the majority of Moroccans are thwarted, however, either because they lack the financial means or because they belong to the 90% of annual applicants who are unlucky in the *qur'a* or lottery-system through which the Moroccan government distributes the restricted number of visas issued by the Saudi regime (Al-Ajarma, 2020: 88, 215–56). Precisely because only a small number of Moroccans have the opportunity to fulfill their religious duty, those who have performed the hajj enjoy a special status in their networks and are addressed by the honorific title '*el-hajj*' for male pilgrims or '*el-hajja*' for female ones. In the stories that returning pilgrims share in their social networks, they tend to highlight the positive dimensions of the hajj journey and the moral lessons that can be learned.

6 See https://makkahlive.net/tvcamera.aspx, accessed 2 December 2020.

7 For a brief description of the hajj rites, see Buitelaar, Stephan-Emmrich, and Thimm (2021: 1–2). For a particularly informative discussion of the (shifting) meanings of the various rites in the Islamic tradition, see Katz (2004).

An obvious reason for this is that, for most pilgrims, the hajj is the journey of a lifetime, the memories of which they wish to cherish forever. Another reason is that it is considered ungrateful and disrespectful for those who are considered to have been 'called to Mecca by God' to make critical remarks or speak negatively about the most sacred city in Islam.

Indeed, Moroccan conventions of hajj storytelling are characterised by stressing one's utmost gratitude for 'being called by God', one's *sabr* or patient endurance of all hardships encountered during the journey, and one's experience of a total transformation as a result of being cleansed of all sins by a successful hajj performance. Recurrent tropes in hajj stories concern the capacity to leave behind all one's daily concerns and dedicate oneself fully to worshipping God, being overwhelmed by emotion upon seeing the Ka'ba, experiencing the power of the *umma* by merging with the flow of pilgrims from all over the world as they circle the Ka'ba, being in a state in which one does not sense hunger, thirst or fatigue, and returning home like a new-born baby and with great peace of mind (Hammoudi, 2006; Al-Ajarma, 2020; Buitelaar, 2020).[8]

Although a trend can currently be observed among young and mid-adult pilgrims to share negative personal experiences too, most tend to so only in private settings in the company of close relatives and friends.[9] However, a few months after Al-Ajarma started her fieldwork, through her interlocutors she came to learn about some much discussed public Facebook pages that feature interviews and images of poor conditions and malpractices that pilgrims are sometimes confronted with during the pilgrimage.

The channels and strategies for hajj storytelling in public and private settings work out quite differently in Dutch society, where Muslims only make up approximately 5% of the total population.[10] Dutch Moroccans who aspire to perform hajj do not face the same hindrances as pilgrims in Morocco; their

8 Although local traditions of hajj storytelling vary across time and space, Al-Ajarma recognised these topics in the hajj stories of Moroccan pilgrims as closely resembling those in the stories told by pilgrims in her homeland, Palestine. Authors who discuss hajj stories of pilgrims with Pakistani backgrounds similarly mention these topics (see Werbner, 2003; Haq and Jackson, 2009; McLoughlin, 2015). Also see Carol Delaney (1990: 520), who notes that the hajj stories of Turkish pilgrims she studied tended to be 'stereotypical' rather than personalised accounts. Such oral stories resonate with, but do not coincide with the usually much more elaborate historical written hajj counts, in which the long journey towards Mecca often receives much attention (see, amongst others, Metcalf, 1990; Wolf, 1997; Kateman, 2020; van Leeuwen, 2021).

9 Also see Haq and Jackson (2009), who similarly note intergenerational differences among Pakistani pilgrims from Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora in Australia.

10 https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/82904NED/table?dl=35BF3, accessed 1 October 2020.

financial situation is generally better and the quota system does not affect them.[11] However, belonging to a religious minority in the Netherlands comes with other drawbacks. Many of Buitelaar's interlocutors told her that, when they inform non-Muslim colleagues and friends about their plans to perform hajj, rather than being congratulated, they often receive reticent if not negative responses, such as expressions of concern about the frenzy and dangers of millions of (supposedly ecstatic) pilgrims packed together in one place. Several pilgrims had been hesitant to tell non-Muslim acquaintances about their pilgrimage plans, lest they might be suspected of belonging to conservative or radical Islamic movements. Although in recent years there have been occasional news reports about the approximately 3,000 pilgrims who travel to Mecca from Schiphol airport each year, the hajj season goes practically unnoticed in Dutch mainstream media. Like Benchickhi, however, some young Muslims have shared their experiences of the pilgrimage to Mecca in posts on public social media platforms that, according to Buitelaar's interlocutors, are popular among Moroccan-Dutch youths.

The study of public representations of the hajj was not central to our respective sub-projects within the larger hajj research project. The reason for discussing the different sets of public hajj posts together in this article is that these were mentioned by our interlocutors in conversations with us and between themselves. In line with the overall theme of our research project on modern articulations of the pilgrimage to Mecca, in this article our primary interest concerns an exploration of how posts about the hajj on public media platforms in Morocco and the Netherlands contribute to the conventions of hajj storytelling. More specifically, by comparing posts by pilgrims from Morocco and the Netherlands, our aim is to enhance our understanding of the impact on the conventions of hajj storytelling of the specific constellations of power structures and socio-cultural practices in which pilgrims are embedded. In what follows, we shall discuss two different sets of practice: posts by, or featuring, 'ordinary' pilgrims on public Facebook pages in Morocco, and blogs by (semi)professional bloggers and influencers in the Netherlands on Facebook and Youtube. For Morocco, we shall discuss how, by mediating their hajj experiences on public platforms, pilgrims challenge the ways the hajj is framed in Morocco's national media. For the Netherlands, we zoom in on a trend among

11 The quota system also applies for the Netherlands, but since the number of available visas is based on countries' total population, as yet, the number of applicants never exceeds the allocated number of visas.

pilgrims who post self-presentations in blogs and vlogs on Facebook and YouTube that deconstruct dominant images of the Muslim 'other'. [12]

2 Morocco: Challenging National Representations of the Hajj Experience

Each year, when the first group of Moroccan pilgrims is ready to embark the airplane to Saudi Arabia, the Moroccan Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs reads out a farewell speech on behalf of the Moroccan king. The king addresses the pilgrims in his capacity as Morocco's *Amir el-mu'minin*, 'Commander of the faithful'. Besides the importance of the hajj as a religious duty, two other recurrent topics in the king's speeches concern the important role of the Moroccan government and the king for the organisation of the hajj from Morocco, and the responsibilities of pilgrims as 'ambassadors for their country' in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ajarma, 2020: 194–8). During the weeks surrounding the hajj, national media broadcast carefully orchestrated presentations of Moroccan pilgrims, who report on their hajj experiences and express their gratitude for being able to perform the pilgrimage under the king's patronage. Pilgrims who post their images and stories on social media likewise tend to highlight positive experiences. However, stories that challenge the rosy picture by addressing the hazards, disappointments, and sometimes outright wrongs that pilgrims may encounter can also be found on social media. In fact, platforms like Facebook have become important players in providing information that Morocco's national media have not yet been able to catch up with or that they choose to ignore, as the following examples illustrate.

In 2015, on the first day of the *'id al-adha*, the Sacrificial Feast, Al-Ajarma was watching television with her fieldwork family in Fes. Waiting for the live broadcast of the sermon at the national *'id* prayers, in which the King was going to be present on the Moroccan national television Channel 1, the head of the family zapped back and forth between Channel 1 and the Makkah Live and Medina Live channels, which broadcast live 24/7 from the Holy Places. Then, within minutes, on all three channels a red breaking news line appeared announcing: 'accident in Mina, number of victims unknown'. Worried about a friend of his who was on hajj, Al-Ajarma's host immediately tried to phone his friend,

12 Since this article discusses pilgrims' use of digital media, we focus on their agency and zoom in on their motivations to share their memories on public platforms. We realise, however, that once digitised, these data objects take on a life of their own and become 'actants' that are no longer under the full control of those who posted them (see Schwarz, 2014: 16).

but received no answer. He then contacted his friend's children, one of whom was able to assure him that he had just spoken to his father, who, thanks to God, was well. He made several more phone calls to mutual friends to inform them that their friend in Mecca was safe, before turning back to watching the television.

Many pilgrims who were injured or lost their lives that day were not identified and others were missing for days. Social media turned out to be a crucial tool for locating and identifying victims. On Facebook, several groups and individuals started to post images of pilgrims in hospitals, asking people who recognised them to contact the authorities. Lists giving the names of dead, injured and missing pilgrims were posted online. A Moroccan resident in Saudi Arabia reported constantly on the injured and dead in Mina and posted information about pilgrims and their pictures. People called the man a 'hero' in recognition of his dedication and effort in locating Moroccan pilgrims after the disaster, feeling that the Moroccan state had failed or was too slow to inform the population.

Similar help came from another Facebook group called the 'Service of Moroccan pilgrims', which had been set up a few years earlier to assist Moroccan pilgrims with advice, announcements and news before and during the hajj season. Under the leadership of a group of Moroccans based in Saudi Arabia, the group strives to help Moroccan pilgrims by sharing advice and reporting news of incidents during the hajj. The group regularly announces news of missing pilgrims, asking pilgrims who might have seen them in Mecca to contact them. The following are two examples from the page:

FIGURE 1 Screenshots of posts concerning (different) lost (18 July 2017) and found pilgrims (9 September 2016)

The group also regularly posts images and videos from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and shares announcements about hajj registration in Morocco. In these posts, many Moroccans have an opportunity to take part in interactive questions and answers with the members of the group and share opinions and comments.

The impact of what may be characterised as online civil society initiatives such as those described above extends beyond facilitating pilgrims. In many ways, such social media initiatives challenge the official media discourse on the hajj. Parallel to national news media reports on the 'satisfaction and good services' provided for the pilgrims on Facebook and YouTube, for example, stories, images and videos that describe the opposite are also posted. During the first days of the hajj season of 2017, for instance, several Facebook posts depicted Moroccan pilgrims complaining about hardships in Mecca resulting from management failures that left them without food, transport and shelter. On YouTube, a video was posted showing distressed Moroccans sitting on the sidewalk in front of a hotel in Mecca after finding that no proper accommodation arrangements had been made for them. In another video, a Moroccan pilgrim directly addressed his fellow citizens at home to warn them about unsanitary accommodation and poor quality food: 'Moroccans, if you are planning to come on hajj next year, you need to claim your rights. There is only hunger and dirt.'[13]

After several similar videos circulated on social media, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs made an official statement on its website and Facebook page insisting that the accommodation for Moroccan pilgrims in Mecca was satisfactory and that 'some allegations reported by some media outlets' were 'lies dating back to previous years'. However, a few days later, the predicament of Moroccan pilgrims was acknowledged to some extent and it was reported that Moroccan government officials in Mecca had held an emergency meeting in Saudi Arabia with the National Tawafa Establishment for Pilgrims of Arabian Countries to solve the problems.[14] Following similar reports about bad hajj management the following year, parliamentarian Ibtissame Azzaoui posted an invitation to Moroccan pilgrims on her Facebook page to report

13 Complaints about food and hygiene in 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82kcDamuQaU accessed 13 November 2020; about lack of accommodation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJbaHOeJH_ accessed 13 November 2020. Also see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XVTbc1b6U8 accessed 13 November 2020, and Al-Ajarma 2020, 203–206 for more examples.

14 Cf. https://www.facebook.com/ministere.habous/posts/2077636868966528/ accessed 13 November 2020 https://ifada.ma/politique-economie/maroc-5981.html accessed 13 November 2020

malpractice to her so that she might ask questions about it in Parliament.[15] What differentiates the complaints of pilgrims discussed above from stories about the kind of hardship that in the eyes of most pilgrims should be endured as part and parcel of the experience of the hajj as a lesson in *sabr* and humility, is that they pertain to bad hajj management and to the non-delivery of services that pilgrims have paid for.

These examples illustrate the power of social media as modes of information exchange that allow people to speak outside the structures of power (Mitra, 2004: 496). In the examples discussed above, pilgrims circumvented the information in the official media and challenged the ideal image of the hajj experience presented there. Equally interesting in relation to mediating Mecca are the effects on the conventions of hajj storytelling of what media scholars call the 'context collapse' that occurs through these examples. Context collapse refers to the opportunity provided by digital media such as Facebook to transcend physical boundaries and share one's experiences with wider publics simultaneously. Such communication across social contexts differs significantly from face-to-face social interactions within a single social situation. Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) argument that people present themselves differently in different social situations and for different audiences, the study of 'context collapse' investigates the effects of bringing together otherwise distinct social domains and publics in specific social media uses (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 115).

Context collapse is usually understood in terms of actors' personal networks in different social domains, such as the family, the workplace, one's circle of friends, et cetera. Here, however, we see a slightly different kind of collapse, that is, one between the *in-situ* context where pilgrims negotiate amongst themselves the meanings of the hajj as they go through the experience, and the home context in Morocco. In the subproject on Dutch pilgrims, we found significant differences between stories that 'emerge' through exchanges between pilgrims about their experiences as the hajj unfolds documented through participant observation and stories produced in post-pilgrimage interviews. Once they have returned home, pilgrims from both Morocco and the Netherlands tend to attune their stories to the sacredness and ideal image of Mecca, thus positioning the hajj above the messiness of everyday life by emphasising the more positive and spiritual dimensions of their pilgrimage experiences, particularly by foregrounding the moral lessons learnt through hajj performance. In terms

15 See https://m.facebook.com/Ibtissame.Azzaoui.PAM/posts/997951353699656/?_rdr, accessed 13 November 2020. She posted the written question she had submitted in Parliament in October 2018.

of Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the stories emerging during the hajj performance itself belong more to a 'backstage' context, where pilgrims share their experiences amongst themselves, whereas the stories pilgrims narrate in their personal networks upon their return home concern 'front stage' representations of these experiences for a wider public.

In images and messages posted on Facebook and YouTube, the boundaries between these two contexts collapse, allowing those at home a glimpse of emergent stories as the hajj unfolds rather than having to wait for more matured stories in which narrators present themselves first and foremost as devout, patient and grateful pilgrims. In this respect, it would be interesting to learn how the pilgrim who angrily complained in the video about poor services looks back on appearing in this way. While on the spur of the moment he obviously felt justified in addressing malpractice, it cannot be excluded that in hindsight he might feel somewhat uncomfortable about his appearance in this video; the anger he showed does not match the expectations that people have of someone who has performed the pilgrimage and who is supposed to have been transformed by the spiritual experience. Moreover, although self-presentation does play a role in many postings of pilgrims on social media (see, e.g., Caidi, Beazley, and Colomer Marquez, 2018), it was most probably not this pilgrim's main concern when he addressed a wider Moroccan audience in the video. In fact, his contribution to a narrative that counters Morocco's mainstream national representation of the hajj was the outcome of unintended disclosure.

In the next section, we shall turn to blogs and Facebook postings by Dutch pilgrims to discuss what could be called counter narratives that are the outcome of more deliberate efforts to present oneself as a pilgrim. Particularly in the Netherlands, where Islam is a minority religion, such self-representational acts provide insight in how Mecca features in the multiple senses of belonging of Dutch pilgrims with migration backgrounds.

3 The Netherlands: Creating New Discursive Space

'Presencing' concerns user-generated media content through which individuals or groups circulate information about themselves for the purpose of sustaining a public presence (Couldry, 2012: 50). Such self-presentational acts respond to the increasing desire of modern citizens to have a public presence beyond their physical presence. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's (1991) concept of 'project of the self', Nick Couldry places presencing in the context of the demands for individuals in modern society to design their own lives. He argues that the practice allows young people 'to have some public agency when they

suffer restrictions on their ability to participate in face-to-face public space' (Couldry, 2012: 50). The Internet provides a virtual platform where individuals and communities can produce a presence that might be denied to them in the offline world (Mitra, 2004: 492). Several studies have demonstrated how marginalised groups in society use the Internet to articulate specific narratives and discourses about their own group or subculture that counter misrepresentation and exclusion in mainstream media (see, e.g., Brouwer 2004; Eckert and Chadha, 2013).

Concerning Muslims in the Netherlands, Lenie Brouwer (2006), for example, demonstrates that, in their online self-presentations, Moroccan-Dutch girls challenge both limiting conceptions in the dominant Western image of Muslim women, as well as those that circulate among citizens with Moroccan backgrounds. Similarly, in his study of various modalities of identity performativity of young Muslims across Internet applications, Koen Leurs (2015) demonstrates how joining the Dutch social networking site Yves allowed users to articulate alternative self-narratives. In an article with Sandra Ponzanesi, Leurs expands Nirmal Puwar's (2004) argument concerning outsiders who 'invade' space reserved for privileged others. The authors argue that Dutch-Moroccan youth become digital 'space invaders' by aligning with majority group affiliations to global youth life-styles and activism (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2014: 639). In a similar vein, Charlotte van de Ploeg (2017: 75) demonstrates how Muslim Dutch bloggers produce images that counter representations in which Muslims are reduced to their 'Muslimness'. These bloggers challenge being excluded from dominant media platforms precisely by engaging with them.

The new discursive space that Dutch Muslims create for themselves on online platforms may have an inward or an outward orientation (see ibid., 2017: 79–80). Platforms with an inward orientation operate as 'enclaves' where users can experiment with constructing their identity in a safe space where they are less hindered by the negative gaze of non-Muslims (see Leurs, 2015). Platforms with an outward orientation operate by 'invading' the public space of dominant groups with the aim of 'normalising' their own presence in mainstream media.

A number of young Dutch Muslims have posted blogs or vlogs about their pilgrimage to Mecca on Facebook and YouTube with the aim of reaching publics beyond their personal networks. Several research participants refer to these bloggers and vloggers admiringly, often to argue that their images and videos account to a considerable extent for the recent popularity of the pilgrimage to Mecca among young Muslims. The admiration for these bloggers indicates that the emancipatory power of 'coming out' as a practising Dutch Muslim has an enormous appeal among Muslim youth. The blogs and images we discuss here mostly mix an outward and inward orientation, addressing young Muslims

and a non-Muslim audience simultaneously by presenting their producers as multidimensional individuals.

Of the bloggers we discuss here, the posts of the aforementioned Benchikhi are characterised most strongly by an inward orientation. His Mecca documentary – which had had 356,596 views when we last checked – sketches a strikingly 'cool' image of the pilgrimage.[16] Besides showing Benchikhi performing the *ṭawaf* whilst looking into the camera to explain what he is doing and seeing,[17] we also see him hanging out at night with a few young Saudi men outperforming each other with acrobatic stunts on their motorbikes. The documentary also includes shots of non-pilgrimage related special outings, such as quad racing in the desert outside Mecca.

Asked about his motivation for making the documentary, Benchikhi stated:

> The film takes doing my religious duty to a next level. I reach and motivate all those Dutch-speaking Moroccan youth in Belgium and the Netherlands. I receive WhatsApp messages from guys stating that after seeing the film they decided to go on pilgrimage. Even guys who were deep into drugs, you know. There was this lad who said: 'Me and my brother were drug dealers, but then we saw your documentary we decided to go on pilgrimage with the entire family.' That really moves me.

Although Dutch-speaking Muslim youths are his primary intended audience, Benchikhi is also proud to have reached non-Muslims:

> At the University of Amsterdam, they use my documentary in class. There was this Protestant student who sent me an email saying that he used to view Islam in a negative light, but thanks to the documentary he's come to see it as something positive. That sort of thing is an enormous drive for me.

In 2019, Benchikhi toured the Netherlands with a show called 'From Mecca to Marrakesh', in which he combined stand-up comedy with showing a film in which he traces how Islam came from Mecca to Morocco. His audience consisted of about 90% Moroccan-Dutch youth,[18] a public that theatres

16 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIbHV9ulP70&t=28s, accessed 7 November 2020.

17 In Buitelaar's interview with the filmmaker, he explained that he had first performed the rites 'for real', and then did them again for the film.

18 Personal observation by Buitelaar at one of the performances, confirmed by Benchicki in the interview.

normally have difficulties attracting. In the interview, Benchikhi explained that he had been motivated to make the film because he found it problematic that Dutch-Moroccan citizens who grew up in the Netherlands know more about Dutch history than what he called 'their own history'. Rather than suggesting that they should not regard themselves as Dutch, Benchikhi hopes that learning about their Moroccan and Muslim roots will empower Moroccan-Dutch youth to confidently take up their own position in Dutch society:

> To me personally, learning only about Dutch history felt somewhat like a 'sell-out'. Whereas if you know more about who you are, your own history, that gives you confidence. I myself had no idea how come I was born a Muslim. Once you realise that soon after the advent of Islam Morocco became Muslim, and that Islam has formed our history, then you have a story to tell if you are asked about your background. […] Those kids don't read books, but starting the film with the pilgrimage you can catch their attention and tell them how Mecca is related to who they are as Moroccans. […] Having that knowledge makes them proud and resilient. Once you know who you are, it becomes enriching to learn about other peoples and histories. For example, in case someone tells me a story about Paul in the New Testament, if I don't know my own history I get uncertain. But if I know the history of Islam, then I feel more like: 'Cool, tell me all about Paul, how interesting!'

Despite the inward orientation of his documentaries, then, Benchickhi's aim is not to create an 'enclave' that might function as a safe space where Dutch-Moroccan youths can withdraw, but to empower these youths to insert themselves in Dutch society and feel confident to reach out to others by being solidly rooted in the specificities of their Moroccan background. It is also interesting to note that Benchickhi includes Mecca in the imaginary landscape of different belongings for Dutch-Moroccans. Arguing that, for some Moroccan-Dutch youths, Mecca has a stronger appeal than their country of origin, by linking the two he hopes to enhance their identification with their country of origin as part of their own history.

Mohsin Amdaouech is another Moroccan-Dutch vlogger whom some of our interlocutors referred to as having inspired young Muslims to perform the pilgrimage by posting a video about his journey to Mecca. Amdaouech is an influencer in his early thirties whose Facebook page #MohsinopWereldreis is quite popular among Dutch-Moroccan youth.[19] His posts have a mixed inward

19 Translation: 'Mohsin on World Tour'.

and outward orientation and he posts videos in which he features either as a single traveller to numerous distant holiday destinations or as a travel guide for groups of young Dutch tourists with different ethnic backgrounds.[20] In 2019, Amdaouech posted several video clips about his surprise *'umra* with his parents.[21] Statements that he has made on his own Facebook page and in the Dutch media provide insight into what might account for the popularity among young Dutch Moroccans of his #MohsinopWereldreis account in general and, in particular, the episode about his performance of the *'umra* with his parents. Regarding an earlier trip to Iran that he had made with his father, for example, he stated: 'Travelling is the best way to get to know your parents'. About a journey to Latin America with his mother, he commented: 'I want to show my mother my world.'[22] Particularly informative is the caption – in English, underscoring his cosmopolitan self-presentation – that accompanies a post on his Facebook page in which he wishes his followers a happy 2020:

> We are united in our differences. Ask the next person you see what their passion is and share your inspiring dream with them. Don't forget to pray and thank god for what you have. Travel often. Getting lost will help you find yourself. Some opportunities come only once, seize them.[23]

One message that emerges from Amdaouech's posts is that one can be a practising Muslim and cosmopolitan citizen and consumer at the same time, and another that it is possible to discover one's own path in life while staying loyal to one's parents and their life-world. Featuring in a long series of enjoyable trips, similar to Benchikhi's videos, Amdaouech's posts present the pilgrimage to Mecca as a cool thing to do that one does not have to postpone until old age, as was customary among previous generations (see Buitelaar 2020). At the same time, Amdaouech depicts Muslims as multidimensional individuals who have much in common with other Dutch youth who enjoy travelling

20 See https://www.facebook.com/mohsinopwereldreis/, accessed 7 November 2020.

21 That is, his parents had already arrived in Medina from where they would go on *'umra*, when Amdaouech surprised them by suddenly arriving at their hotel. See https://www.facebook.com/mohsinopwereldreis/videos/961459290715582/, accessed 8 November 2020.

22 See https://denieuwemaan.ntr.nl/papa-en-ik-samen-op-reis/ and https://www.ad.nl/gouda/mohsin-neemt-zijn-moeder-mee-op-reis~a1bc3afb/, accessed 8 November 2020.

23 For the entire message, see: https://www.facebook.com/mohsinopwereldreis/photos/my-letter-to-you2019-was-an-amazing-year-hmdl-i-made-a-spiritual-trip-to-mecca-a/1231704847021835/, accessed 8 November 2020.

the world. In keeping with the argument made by Leurs and Ponzanesi (2014) about young Dutch-Moroccan 'space invaders', in his posts Amdaouech thus makes a point about diversity by linking a journey that is specific to Muslims with Dutch majority group affiliations and global youth life-styles shared by the tourists of various ethnic backgrounds who travel with him.

In a similar vein, two vloggers who go by the name of 'Deen Travellers' (Faith travellers) on Facebook, have inserted themselves with posts on their pilgrimage to Mecca into another Dutch public space that has so far been predominantly occupied by non-Muslims: that of environmental activism. In 2017, Rudi van der Aar, then a 26-year-old Muslim of mixed Indonesian and Dutch descent, and 27-year-old Mohammed Kechouch, who is of Moroccan descent, travelled most of the way from the Netherlands to Mecca on wooden bikes.[24] Van der Aar had performed his first *'umra* a few years earlier. Shocked by the huge quantities of waste on Jabal al-Nur, the mountain near Mecca where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have received his first revelations, he felt an urgent need to get the mountain cleaned up. After discussing the waste problem with Kechouch, an avid cyclist, the two friends decided to embark on a project to address the protection of the planet by cycling to Mecca. Besides wanting to perform the *'umra*, their aim was to launch a campaign to clean up Jabal al-Nur. Their journey to Mecca took twelve weeks and was in itself an important part of their environmental awareness-raising project. Their sponsored wooden bikes attracted much attention in the countries they crossed, facilitating their aim 'to plant seeds', as they call it, in the hearts of people of different cultural and religious backgrounds about the urgent need for a more sustainable life-style.

During the journey, the cycling pilgrims posted several videos on the Deen Travellers Facebook page, and they have continued to do so for projects that they subsequently organised to raise awareness about sustainability by, for example, cooperating with mosques to organise 'planting plants days' with children to improve their own neighbourhood. To spread their message and raise funds for new projects, they have given numerous lectures about their bike tour to Mecca, including one at the well-known debating centre Pakhuis Willem de Zwijger in Amsterdam. Several mainstream written media

24 Apart from a boat crossing from Cairo to Jeddah, the whole journey was by bike, as van der Aar explained in a lecture the Deen Travellers gave in June 2018 at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in connection with the hajj exhibition there. Buitelaar talked to van der Aar and Kechouch directly after the lecture and subsequently had an interview with Kechouch a few weeks later.

have interviewed them, including the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*. Thus, the Deen Travellers have been able to reach a huge audience of predominantly non-Muslim readers with the story of their pilgrimage to Mecca.

Rather than being foregrounded, religious inspiration is a taken-for-granted presence in the self-presentations in van der Aar and Kechouch's interviews, posts and lectures. As the latter explained in his interview with Buitelaar, central to the Deen Travellers' message is the responsibility of all humans, regardless their religious or cultural backgrounds, to protect the environment.[25] The stories about their bike tour to Mecca contain messages for multiple groups: Muslim kids learn about their responsibility as Muslims to protect the earth, while non-Muslims learn that Muslims are not 'only' engaged with Islamic doctrine and ritual, but can also be (religiously inspired) environmentalist activists. One of the ways the Deen Travellers underscore the relevance of joint efforts by people of all faiths and views to save the planet consists of telling engaging stories about mostly non-Muslim people in the various countries they crossed on their journey to Mecca who supported their cause by offering them food and a place to sleep.

Pertinent to our argument here is that, in line with the findings of Leurs and van de Ploeg concerning Muslim vloggers on social media in the Netherlands, the Deen Travellers deploy their self-presentation as pilgrims to Mecca as a point of entry to reach both Muslims and non-Muslim publics with a universal issue. Mixing an inward and outward orientation, they insert themselves as Muslim Dutch citizens in mainstream online public space, in this case platforms that focus on sustainability.

The most outward-oriented Dutch blogs about the hajj are those posted by Sadettin Kırmızıyüz, a well-known Turkish-Dutch actor and theatre producer, whose productions are staged in major mainstream theatres.[26] In his plays, Kırmızıyüz uses his personal experiences as the son of a migrant to address themes such as migration, religion and multiple belongings. In 2010, at the age of 28, he performed the hajj with his father. The blogs he posted on the website of the theatre company Trouble Man whilst on hajj were related to the then forthcoming play 'The Father, the Son, and the Holy Festival',[27] with which Kırmızıyüz toured the Netherlands in 2010 and 2011. The theme of the play concerns the cultural and emotional gap between the poorly educated father who was raised in Turkey and the highly educated actor who grew up in the Netherlands, the purpose of their joint pilgrimage to Mecca, and its effect

25 Date interview: 9 July 2019.

26 See also Mangel (2017: 47–50).

27 In Dutch: *De vader, de zoon, en het heilige feest*.

FIGURE 2 Left: the Deen Traveller's logo on the wooden bikes they rode to Mecca. Right: raising awareness at Jabal al-Nur about waste reduction and sustainability
© DEEN TRAVELLERS, 2017

on their relationship. In his first blog, Kırmızıyüz states that, while 'the seed for visiting the Ka'ba was planted in childhood', he cannot disentangle what came first: the wish to perform the pilgrimage or to make the theatre production about his relationship with his father.[28] The detailed descriptions and explanations of the hajj rites the actor offers in his blogs indicate that his intended audience consists mostly of a non-Muslim Dutch public that is not familiar with the pilgrimage. Reaching out to non-Muslims also comes to the fore in an excerpt about the supplication prayers he made near the Ka'ba in which he explicitly includes a general audience:

> My thoughts were with my love, my mother, my sister, my brother and his family. With everybody! Yes, they were with you too, and I thought: 'I pray for everybody I know and who I will get to know.'[29]

Bridging between Muslims and non-Muslims also occurs in the way Kırmızıyü links characters and narratives from Islamic history to those from other religions. The very title of the play, for example, is a witty allusion to the Christian reference to the Trinity. Similarly, after arriving in Medina, he writes:

> This is where the grave of the Messenger is! The next seven days, the concluding ones of my hajj, I will go to greet him! Look, to me, Jesus, Buddha, Moses and Rama are also very special, I truly mean that. But Buddha has been reincarnated so often, and the grave of Jesus is empty, while Moses

28 https://troubleman.nl/blog-mekka/, accessed 6 November 2020.
29 ibid.

> lies buried in a place unknown to me somewhere in the Sinai. But here I can get up from my bed and walk straight to Muhammad's grave. I find that, to say the least… very special.[30]

Orienting the readers of his blogs toward his play, besides his self-representations as a pilgrim, Kırmızıyüz also presents himself in his posts as a theatre producer who deliberately alternates total immersion in the hajj ritual with a more distant stance to reflect on his experiences and feelings, particularly those concerning his relationship to his father. Thus, much like Amdaouech and the Deen Travellers, he links the specifically Islamic ritual of the hajj to a universal theme, in his case the father-son relationship, that people should be able to relate to regardless of their world view.[31]

Contemplations concerning the universal moral lessons to be learned from the performance of pilgrimage to Mecca and reflections on how the encounter with pilgrims from different cultural backgrounds ties in with one's own multiple senses of belonging obviously also occurs in hajj accounts of pilgrims from Muslim majority countries (see van Leeuwen 2021). We would argue, however, that such reflections gain particular pertinence for pilgrims from minority groups living in a post-migration context (see also Werbner 2003; McLoughlin 2015; Johnson 2020). The Mecca-blogs discussed here illustrate how the various cultural discourses that inform the habitus of pilgrims raised in the Netherlands may resonate in their hajj-accounts, thus adding new story lines to the conventions of hajj storytelling inherited from their parents' generation.

In keeping with the findings of Leurs (2015) and van der Ploeg (2017), the hajj blogs discussed also demonstrate the empowering potential of using social media to counter negative or at least one-sided presentations of Muslims as the 'Other'. At the same time, however, one may question the voluntary nature of the desire to present oneself as self-appointed 'ambassadors of Islam' to a non-Muslim Dutch audience (see van Es, 2019). Reflecting on the state of the art in the anthropological study of Islam in Europe, Nadia Fadil addresses the legacy of a historical Orientalist discourse that continues to inform the dominant popular European frame in which Islam is depicted as a violent religion, and European Muslims as the abject 'other'. She argues that one of the

30 ibid.

31 In a recent interview, Kırmızıyüz states that, in present-day Dutch society, it would be impossible for him to present a light-hearted and humorous play like 'The Father, the Son and the Holy Festival'. Both Islamophobia and Muslim radicalism would prohibit it. To counter these trends, his plays have therefore become more explicitly activist. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa10QtuKSYM&feature=youtu.be, accessed 9 November 2020.

tensions caused by this frame revolves around the challenge for researchers to deconstruct the image of a binary opposition between a Western 'us' and a Muslim 'other', while simultaneously doing justice to the specificity of the religious experiences of European Muslims. We would argue that the double bind inherent in efforts to 'account for the distinctiveness of ethical subjectivity of Muslims, while at the same time downplaying it' (Fadil, 2019: 118) also impacts the self-presentations as pilgrims of Dutch Muslim bloggers who strive to create a more favourable, multidimensional image of Muslims. Like the anthropologists who study them, they cannot avoid being affected by a discourse in which integration into European society is the yardstick by which the distinction between the 'good' Muslim and the 'bad' Muslim is measured.

4 Conclusion

In this article we have discussed some representations of the pilgrimage to Mecca posted by pilgrims from Morocco and the Netherlands on public social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook with the aim of reaching publics beyond their personal networks. A comparison was made between two different sets of practices that our interlocutors in Morocco and the Netherlands drew our attention to: the postings of 'ordinary' pilgrims in Morocco, and those of popular bloggers, environmentalists, and a playwright in the Netherlands. In both countries, the posts discussed challenge representations that circulate in the mainstream media about Islam in general and Mecca in particular. Those posted by pilgrims from Morocco expose the more negative aspects of the hajj experience that are absent in the rosy picture sketched in state-owned media. In contrast, in the Netherlands, in efforts to challenge one-sided preconceptions concerning Islam among mostly non-Muslim Dutch citizens, the blogs we discussed tend to emphasise the positive and universal dimensions of hajj practices and meanings, while downplaying or keeping silent about more negative experiences and exclusivist claims to Muslim sacred space.

In both countries, such representations include statements about the pilgrims' citizenship claims. Since in Morocco the organisation of the hajj is a state-monopoly and takes place under the patronage of the king, by complaining about bad hajj-management, pilgrims present themselves as assertive Moroccan citizens who expect their government to treat them fairly and provide them with what is rightly theirs as customers who have paid large amounts of money for the all-in package tour to Mecca. In the Netherlands, by presenting themselves as multidimensional pilgrims, the bloggers reject the image that exists in popular discourse of the one-dimensional 'Muslim Other'

and replace it with alternative presentations that demonstrate their multiple belongings, interests and needs as Muslim Dutch citizens.

The examples of digital mediation of the hajj discussed in this article demonstrate that media technologies are capable of having great moral significance as well as material consequences (Horst and Miller, 2012; Gershon, 2017). They are embedded in, but also shape, the habits, expectations, experiences and feelings of pilgrims. Digitised mediation of hajj experiences is thus an 'integrative practice' that combines personal memory, interpersonal bonding and communal history production (Couldry, 2012: 51). They thus provide an important new input regarding hajj practices and experiences and the socially evolving conventions of hajj storytelling.

References

Al-Ajarma, Kholoud, "Mecca in Morocco: Articulations of the Muslim pilgrimage (Hajj) in Moroccan everyday life" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Groningen: University of Groningen, 2020).

Benchikhi, Salaheddine, *Salaheddine Punt NL: Kom maar op met Nederland* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 2016).

Brouwer, Lenie, "Dutch Muslims on the Internet: A new discussion platform", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 24/1 (2004), 47–57.

Brouwer, Lenie, "Giving voice to Dutch Moroccan girls on the Internet", *Global Media Journal*, 5/9 (2006). https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/giving-voice-to-dutch-moroccan-girlson-the-Internet.php?aid=35158, accessed 5 November 2020.

Buitelaar, Marjo, "Rearticulating the conventions of hajj storytelling: Second generation Moroccan-Dutch female pilgrims' multi-voiced narratives about the pilgrimage to Mecca", *Religions*, 11/7 (2020), 373; doi:10.3390/rel11070373.

Buitelaar, Marjo, Stephan-Emmrich, Manja, and Thimm, Viola, "Introduction. Muslim pilgrimage through the lens of women's new mobilities", in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond. Reconfiguring Gender, Religion, and Mobility*, Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, and Viola Thimm (eds) (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 1–18.

Caidi, Nadia, Beazley, Susan, and Colomer Marquez, Laia, "Holy selfies: Performing pilgrimage in the age of social media", *International Journal of Information, Diversity & Inclusion*, 2/1–2 (2018), 8–31.

Couldry, Nick, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

Delaney, Carol, "The 'hajj': Sacred and secular", *American Ethnologist*, 17/3 (1990), 513–30.

Eckert, Stine, and Chadha, Kalyani, 2013. "Muslim bloggers in Germany: An emerging counterpublic", *Media, Culture & Society*, 35/8 (2013), 926–42.

Fadil, Nadia, "The anthropology of Islam in Europe: A double epistemological impasse", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 48 (2019), 117–32.

Gershon, Ilana, "Language and the newness of media", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 46 (2017), 15–31.

Giddens, Anthony, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

Hammoudi, Abdellah, *A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Haq, Farooq, and Jackson, John, "Spiritual journey to hajj: Australian and Pakistani experience and expectations", *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 6/2 (2009), 141–56.

Horst, Heather, and Miller, Daniel, "Normativity and materiality: A view from digital anthropology", *Media International Australia*, 145/2 (2012), 103–11.

Johnson, Michelle, *Remaking Islam in African Portugal: Lisbon. Mecca. Bissau* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

Kateman, Ammeke, "In Moroccan pilgrims' own words: The hajj journeys (1321 AH[1903–4]) of Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Kabir al-Kattani and Muhammad bin Ja'far al-Kattani in an age of steam, imperialism and globalization", Research paper 13 of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (Riyadh, 2020). https://www.kfcris.com/ch/view/post/323, accessed 17 February 2021.

Katz, Marion, "The hajj and the study of Islamic ritual", *Studia Islamica*, 98–9 (2004), 95–129.

Leurs, Koen, *Digital Passages: Migrant Youth 2.0: Diaspora, Gender and Youth Cultural Intersections* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

Leurs, Koen, and Ponzanesi, Sandra, "Intersectionality, digital identities and migrant youths: Moroccan-Dutch youths as digital space invaders", in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 632–42.

Mangel, Querien, "Remembering and (re)constructing the memory of the Hajj through the Internet: A study of digital hajj artefacts" (Unpublished MA thesis Religious Studies. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2017).

Marwick, Alice, and boyd, dana, "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience", *New Media & Society*, 13/1 (2011), 114–33.

McLoughlin, Seán, "Pilgrimage, performativity, and British Muslims: Scripted and unscripted accounts of the hajj and umra", in *Hajj. Global Interactions through Pilgrimage*, edited by Luitgard Mols and Marjo Buitelaar (eds) (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015), pp. 41–64.

Metcalf, Barbara, "The pilgrimage remembered: South Asian accounts of the *hajj*", in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, edited by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds) (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 85–110.

Meuzelaar, Andrea, "Seeing through the archival prism: A history of the representation of Muslims on Dutch television" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2014).

Mitra, Ananda, "Voices of the marginalized on the Internet: Examples from a website for women of South-Asia", *Journal of Communication*, 54/3 (2004), 492–510.

Puwar, Nirmal, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

Schwarz, Ori, "The past next door: Neighbourly relations with digital memory-artefacts", *Memory Studies*, 7/1 (2014), 7–21.

van de Ploeg, Charlotte, "Dutch Muslim youth bloggers: Challenging the national discourse on Islam", in *European Muslims and New Media*, edited by Merve Kayikci and Leen d'Haenens (eds) (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), pp. 71–87.

van Es, Margaretha, 2019. "Muslim women as 'ambassadors' of Islam: Breaking stereotypes in everyday life", *Identities*, 26/2 2019), 375–92, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X .2017.1346985.

van Leeuwen, Richard, "In the 'land of wonders': Bint al-Shāṭi"s pilgrimage. The hajj and the construction of reformist religiosity", in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond: Reconfiguring Gender, Religion and Mobility*, Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, and Viola Thimm (eds) (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 166–79.

Werbner, Pnina, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (London: Hurst, 2003).

Wolf, Michael, *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove Press, 1997).